

# First Things First — Getting to Know Your Customer

LTC Larry D. Hollingsworth



PM Battle Command Sustainment Support System (BCS3), Fort Belvoir, VA, recognizes the need for constant and consistent communication and conducts regular meetings with its Army Test and Evaluation Command (ATEC) representative to discuss the BCS3 maneuver sustainment command and control system it's developing. From left, MAJ Sandy Vann-Olejasz, LTC Joseph Grebe, LTC Robert T. Hickson, TSM Jerry Guston and Mary McCall. U.S. Army photo by Debbie Fischer-Belous.

**C**ongratulations on your selection to be a product manager (PM)! You are about to embark on the most challenging and rewarding job of your career. As you prepare to assume your responsibilities, I want to offer two pieces of good old footlocker advice that will have application throughout your tenure as a PM. The first pearl is somewhat philosophical but all too often forgotten — every decision you make potentially impacts Soldiers' ability to survive and execute their battlefield missions. Given that premise, you should demand the very best from your team and expect them to make a difference every day!

My second pearl focuses on customers. The relationship you develop with customers will tremendously affect your organization's contributions to the Army over the next 3 years. The following tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) are the most important lessons I observed, learned and eventually executed as a PM. They all define the customer — the user — as your center of gravity. As a point of clarification, I use the terms customer and

user almost interchangeably. In most cases, you will have either a Directorate for Combat Developments or U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Systems Manager (TSM) as your schoolhouse counterpart. My team considered the schoolhouse our primary customer. We also put great premium on our relationships with users in the field. Both relationships are critically important.

## Customer Focus Starts at the Top

Make customers your organization's top priority. Customer relationship quality is your responsibility — a responsibility that cannot be delegated. The organization will quickly take on your personality when dealing with customers. If your employees see that you put a premium on customer focus and contact, so will they. If they see you discount the customer's voice and involvement during

requirements definition, acquisition planning and product development, they too will discount the customer's contribution. Encourage your senior leaders to play an active and visible role in fostering solid relationships with customers. They should make regular contact at the executive level with each customer's senior leaders to ensure good relationships.

### **Visit the Customer at the Schoolhouse**

There is always a good reason to visit the customer on his turf. Right or wrong, the customer will partly evaluate your commitment to his programs by the frequency of your visits. I visited my customer's location once a month, but established formal program reviews that allowed my division chiefs and project directors to interact in quarterly program updates with each of my customers. Formal schoolhouse visits are in addition to TRADOC-sponsored lab and industry days.

To ensure customer involvement and awareness, make each customer a member of your integrated product teams (IPTs). I also recommend that you visit your customer's senior leaders regularly. Commandants, assistant commandants and chiefs of staff want to know how their branch-specific programs are progressing. Take responsibility for getting your senior leaders

down to the schoolhouse. An established relationship with schoolhouse senior leaders will provide a huge advantage during annual 1-to-N list priority development. Their familiarity with your name and face means familiarity with your products and programs.

### **Visit the User's Environment**

Take the time to see your products in the field, or take advantage of numerous other opportunities where you and your staff interact with field users, even if your product is still in development. Go to the prospective end users and interview Soldiers about existing products. Gain insights on what they like about your product and what they would change. Soldier creativity will amaze you. Pay close attention to the way Soldiers use your products. Modifying equipment for its intended use may imply a material change to make the product more robust or easier to operate. You don't gain those insights from sitting behind your PM desk or attending symposiums.

Take an active role in your products' logistics demonstrations, user tests, developmental tests, operational tests and fielding events. Your presence at these acquisition events is synonymous with the field commander overlooking a bridge crossing — be where you can best influence critical activity. Include field

users on your IPTs. Sponsor User-Lab Days where Soldiers interact with your project directors and engineers. Host symposiums that are user-centric, allowing users to gain confidence in you, the materiel developer community and your civilian engineering staffs.

### **Take Your Customer With You**

I can count on one hand the number of times I went to the Pentagon without my customers. Ironically, I can count the same number of visits on the other hand that I wish I had taken them with me. In most cases, your visits to the Pentagon to brief or update senior leaders will address as a minimum two common themes — discussion about cost and schedule, and discussion about the user's operational requirements. My visits included dozens of sessions regarding the ability to deliver affordable products "on time" that met achievable-incremental operational requirements. There will always be exceptions to this tag-team approach, but as a general rule, unified PM/customer teams will prevail during program scrutiny. However, don't rely on your customers to defend your cost, schedule and performance. Likewise, your customers shouldn't expect you to defend their operational requirements either. Unfortunately, this valuable lesson is usually only learned after the pain from the first unaccompanied visit subsides.

### **Always Tell the Truth — Good or Bad**

Keep your customers informed of program status and changes in the acquisition environment. Solid customer relationships include continuous communication with your customers. Keep them aware of acquisition decisions that affect their products as well as policy and regulatory changes. In many cases, the PM office is your customer's

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best source for acquisition policy. The more you communicate with your customers, the easier it will be when you have to share less positive program information. Believe me, you will have to share bad news with your customers sooner or later. Don't let that exchange be your first contact. Additionally, *always* deliver bad news personally. Notify your customers about schedule slips, funding cuts and test failures along with frequent project and product management updates. Your customers deserve to know the truth, and it's your responsibility to ensure they get it.

### Establish Priorities

Your customers have responsibility for many more products than just those you manage. In most cases, your products compete against dozens, if not hundreds of other mission-essential items. Poorly established and managed priorities hurt all acquisition programs.

Your customers have responsibilities to materiel developers and the science and technology communities to establish those priorities of effort in the PM offices and the technology base labs. Limited human and fiscal resources demand identification of each school marquis programs.

### Communicate, Communicate, Communicate!

Include your customers and Pentagon teammates in your weekly staff meetings. This frequency of dialogue sets the foundation for solid relationships

that are absolutely critical for effectively discussing tough materiel and combat developer issues. Leverage video-teleconferencing or weekly teleconferences to collectively meet with your entire acquisition team. Include your schoolhouse customers, Department of the Army Systems Coordinators (DASCs) from the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Acquisition, Logistics and Technology staff and system synchronization officers (SSOs) from G-8 Force Development. Your team will benefit tremendously from these routine exchanges.

Open dialogue should include, as a minimum, Pentagon fiscal reviews and budget drills, requirements discussions, delivery schedules, new equipment training, IPT schedules, contractor visits and user priorities — just to name a few. Emphasize the importance of constant and consistent

communication with your Pentagon counterparts and customers. Bottom line: your schoolhouse customer, DASC and SSO should all be on your speed dial.

Of equal importance, invest the time to understand how your products operate in the customers' environment. Understand the requirements determination process. Likewise, invest in educating your customers on the acquisition process. Be familiar with your customers' field manuals and doctrine. Understand TTPs and how weapons and systems are employed.

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Likewise, understand the methodologies your customers use to define and document requirements. In most cases, authoring requirements is a collaborative effort between materiel and combat developer. Knowledge *is* power! Knowledge also leads to productivity. Dealing with knowledgeable, informed counterparts on acquisition matters can make a tremendous difference when developing strategies and incrementing capabilities. Your customers must understand the acquisition process to better appreciate what you can deliver. In most cases, you are your customers' best source of education on acquisition matters, Program Objective Memorandum issues and Pentagon policy. Take the time to teach and coach your customers about your business. The return on investment will benefit all concerned in the long run.

You have your work cut out for you. I can't overstate the importance of your responsibility to develop and foster strong relationships of trust and confidence with your customers and end users. I hope these lessons learned will serve as a starting point for you and serve as a reminder for even the most experienced PM teams as to just how important our customers are to the acquisition process. Good luck!

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